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ABSTRACT

Previous research (Dixson, 1995; Fisher & Dixson, 2001) has looked at the connection between the match between children's expectations about the parent-child relationship and their experience of that relationship and how meeting those expectations relates to family satisfaction and conversationally oriented communication patterns. This research looks at the other side of that issue. It explores how conformity orientation relates to satisfaction with 38 adolescents and discovers that the higher the level of conformity reported the lower an adolescent's satisfaction with family life. The paper also examines what expectations about the parent-child relationship children report as not being met. The study finds that they report many kinds of behaviors, feelings and rules as not being met including loving and respecting each other, parents paying attention to children and children completing their chores. The paper concludes with suggestions for next steps in looking at the parent-child relationship from a developmental perspective. (Contains 24 references and 10 tables.) (Author/RS)

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Running Head: Teens Unmet Expectations

What do you want?
Teen's unmet expectations about the parent-child relationship.

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Abstract

Previous research (Dixson, 1995; Fisher & Dixson, 2001) has looked at the connection between the match between children's expectations about the parent-child relationship and their experience of that relationship and how meeting those expectations relates to family satisfaction and conversationally oriented communication patterns. This research looks at the other side of that issue. It explores how conformity orientation relates to satisfaction with 38 adolescents and discovers that the higher the level of conformity reported the lower an adolescent's satisfaction with family life.

We further explore what expectations about the parent-child relationship do children report as not being met. We find that they report many kinds of behaviors, feelings and rules as not being met including loving and respecting each other, parents paying attention to children and children completing their chores.

The paper further discusses next steps in looking at the parent-child relationship from a developmental perspective.

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Introduction

"My daughter turned 13 and vanished into her room, then she turned 16 and she disappeared again, only now she was in the car". This quote from the mother of an adolescent (personal communication, June 20, 2001) captures some of the mystery of what it's like to be in relationship with a teenager. Most parents of adolescents could confirm, from personal experience, what researchers have suggested about this stage in a family's life: raising an adolescent can be "demanding, complex and stressful" (Wan & Jaccard, 1996). While there might exist an understanding that parenting an adolescent might be stressful and holds the potential to negatively impact parenting satisfaction (Wan & Jaccard, 1996), there have been few studies that have investigated what the life satisfaction of the adolescent might be (Shiek, 1999; Young, Miller, 1995).

Review of Literature

Adolescent Development

To gain a greater understanding as to what might lead to adolescent dissatisfaction with family life, it is important to look at what is happening developmentally with a child in this age category. Not only are physical changes taking place at this stage, affecting how the adolescent feels (Comstock, 1994) but behaviors are also changing (Comstock, 1994; Martin & Martin, 2000). The early adolescent is working her way through a variety of new "experiences". She's making role-negotiation adjustments in many of her relationships (Comstock, 1994; Olson & McCubbin 1983), changing the amount of time she spends with family and friends (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Hombeck & Duckkett, 1996) as well as becoming aware of her ever developing unique identity (Erickson, 1968). Larson et al. (1996) captures these developmental experiences when he establishes two significant theses about adolescent family relationships: 1. Adolescence is a time of growing disengagement from family, associated with the process of becoming an independent adult and 2. There is a transformation in the adolescent's relationship

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with parents that maintains a continued closeness and warmth. Because of this transitional condition of an adolescent's life, the conclusion can be drawn, intuitively, that this developmental stage brings with it greater opportunities for life dissatisfaction.

Life satisfaction has been defined as an overall feeling of well-being with one's life and circumstances (Young & Miller, 1995). So, in order to truly understand what might lead to lead to an adolescent's dissatisfaction it is important to explore the aspects of family communication that allow for flexibility and growth that might lead to an adolescent's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with family communication.

The role of family communication

A family's use of communication is key to the adolescent's satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Spencer (1994) claims that the ordinary interaction happening within the context of the family has the potential to regulate important dynamics like intimacy, status, privacy and identity. It is through this routine communication that a child begins to understand his role in the family. Young & Miller (1995) suggest that an adolescent's perception of how his parents feel about him is the most important factor associated with his overall life satisfaction. Dixson & Fisher (2000) support this with their suggestion that family communication is the key to adolescent familial functioning and satisfaction. Larson, Richards, Moneta, Hombeck & Duckett (1996) report that while adolescents are spending less time with their families, time spent talking with the family did not decline. Larson et al. suggest that the parents and the adolescent may be intentionally choosing ways to spend time together that encourage communication.

When the parent and the adolescent child are interacting, there appears to be a style of family communication that produces more highly satisfied adolescents members. Terms like symmetrical (Brody & Moore, 1994), conversationally oriented (Dixson, 1995; Fitzpatrick & Marshall, 1996) and open (White, 2000; Hamill, 1994) have all been used to describe styles of family communication, which are satisfying to adolescents. Fitzpatrick & Marshall (1996) classified family

communication environments as either maintaining a conformity orientation (which suggests the use of parental power to gain the child's agreement) or a conversation orientation (which is defined by parental acceptance of communication and exchange of ideas). Previously published research (Dixson, 1995; White, 2000) indicates the more conversationally oriented the family is, the more likely it is that the parent and adolescent will have a good relationship and meet the relational expectations of the adolescent. Henry's (1994) research further confirms this by reporting that adolescents who were more satisfied with their family life were those who perceived their parents as making use of supportive parenting behaviors. Henry defined these supportive behaviors as encouraging words, praise and also physical affection.

It seems then, it is the family that invites the child into the decision making process (Brody & Moore, 1994; Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995) who frequently participates in open family communication (Hamill, 1994; White, 2000) and maintains an awareness of the importance of routine or everyday interactions (Dixson, 1995; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Hombeck & Duckett, 1996) that stands the greater chance of producing adolescents who indicate a higher level of satisfaction with family life.

Adaptability and flexibility

Adolescent satisfaction is also directly linked to the flexibility or adaptability of the family (Dixson, 1995; Henry & Lovelace, 1995; Martin & Martin, 2000; Olson & McCubbin, 1994). White (2000) proposes that adaptable families create an environment in which the adolescent members are allowed to explore broader viewpoints, which when applied to their own experience have the potential to affect the adolescent's role in the family. Dixson's research (1995) with parent-child relationship models also applies the concepts of adaptability & flexibility directly to the communication happening between parent and child.

The idea of family flexibility however, is not new. Erik Erikson (1968) applied the concept of flexibility in family communication when he wrote about the

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adolescent life development stage.

> "Should a young person feel that the environment tries to deprive him too radically of all the forms of expression which permit him to develop and integrate the next step, he may resist with the wild strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives" p. 130.

The need for family flexible and adaptability is greatest when adolescents face stressors or challenges. Olson & McCubbin (1994) claim that there is no phase of the family life cycle that brings more stress than the adolescent years. Their research indicates that this stage of the family's life requires major shifts in the family system to allow for the ever-changing needs of the adolescent member. In their work studying adolescents and empathy, Henry, Sugar & Plunkett (1996) claim that as an adolescent participates and receives the benefits of family flexibility, they will be encouraged to respond to change as a customary part of their own interpersonal interactions.

The family's ability to adapt also has a direct impact on the outward behavior (both positive and negative in nature) of the adolescent, which is viewed by some to be directly linked to the level of the child's family life satisfaction (Henry, Sager, Plunkett, 1996; Sokol-Katz & Dunham, 1997. Adolescents in White's (2000) research also indicated that it was their family's adaptability (allowing for increased opportunity to experience diverse role interactions and rules) that had a direct impact on their perceptions of the source of moral authority in their life.

Expectations, communication and adaptability

Much of Dixson's (1995) work investigates the child's model of parent-child relationships, the ways in which these models are affected by communication and in turn how the model affects the child's family life satisfaction. According to Dixson, the parent-child relationship influences a child's expectations and beliefs about relationships, thus creating a model. This relationship model may be altered however, as the child enters into subsequent relationships. During adolescence, specifically, children strive to merge the manner in which they learned to build

relationships with the ways in which their peers might be approaching relationship development. This creates new expectations for future parental behaviors (Montemayor, 1983; Youniss, 1980) Under Dixson's model, the parent and child participate in an ongoing relationship that both interacts and influences the participants. It is this analysis of the reciprocity within the parent-child interactions that sets Dixson's work apart from other family communication work. For if there is room for interaction and influence within the parent-child relationship, then there is the possibility that as the relationships a child forms outside the parent-child model change the child's relationship model, then the relationship with the parent could also change. Dixson suggests that a "functioning parent-child systems has to be adaptable to new input from the environment" p. 53. Intuitively it would seem then, that the level of adaptability or flexibility of the parent-child relationship model where much of the adolescent's satisfaction or dissatisfaction emerges. Hamill's (1994) research indicates that it is the more independent adolescent who will show a greater willingness to openly negotiate and compromise with parents as the relationship model adapts and changes.

Adolescent dissatisfaction

So, what happens when the participants in the parent-child relationship are not willing to negotiate or compromise? Does this automatically lead to dissatisfaction or relationship breakdown? According to a study conducted by Sokol-Katz & Dunham (1997) the structure of an adolescent's family life and the quality of the parental attachment have a significant direct effect on whether or not that child will participate in delinquent behavior. Parental attachment in this study dealt especially with the adolescent's perception of the quality of communication and the family's ability to express themselves. Similar findings were reported in a longitudinal study on adolescent health. This report indicated that adolescents who felt connected to their families were less likely to be sexually active at an early age, to participate in fighting, use cigarettes, alcohol or marijuana, and were less likely to be either emotionally upset or suicidal (Resnick, 1997). Intuitively, one could assert

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that a sense of connection or a strong familial attachment may be lessened within family structures where dissatisfied adolescents reside.

So what then, is it that causes an adolescent to be dissatisfied with their family life and to experience unmet expectations? Much of the literature reviewed here indicates that there are characteristics like flexibility (Dixson, 1995; Henry, Sager, Plunkett, 1996; Martin & Martin, 2000; White, 2000), supportive parenting behaviors (Henry, 1994; Longmore, Manning & Giordano, 2001), and family communication styles (Dixson, 1995; Fitzpatrick & Marshall, 1996) that have a direct effect on the life satisfaction of adolescents. Since conversation orientation leads to satisfaction, we would expect families with conformity orientations, which is, by definition, less flexible, less open and less supportive of a child's ideas, to family communication to have adolescents who experience less satisfaction with family life.

H_1: Conformity orientation will be significantly and negatively correlated with adolescent satisfaction.

Dixson and Fisher's (2001) research has supported that when adolescent's expectations of what a parent-child relationship should be are not met (which happens with less conversation orientation in the family) that adolescents are not as satisfied with family life. What these researchers do not report is what behaviors, rules, etc. are likely not to be met from the adolescent perspective. We propose two research questions:

RQ_1: a: What expectations about behaviors, rules, and or feelings do adolescent's report as not being met?

b. Are any of these reported significantly more often than others?

RQ_2: Are there significant differences between the unmet expectations reported by satisfied and unsatisfied adolescents.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited in a number of diverse ways. First, an email was

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posted on an electronic general announcements bulletin board at a midwestern university. This bulletin board reaches most faculty and staff. The posting called for teens willing to spend 20-30 minutes filling out survey forms with the promise of $5.00 upon completion. Forty leads were generated in this manner.

A second method for recruiting participants was to have the teen aged children of one of the authors ask their friends who would ask their friends etc. This generated another 15 leads.

Letters were also sent to Youth Directors of local churches explaining the program and asking for volunteers which yielded five more leads.

Altogether sixty packets were sent out to adolescents agreeing to complete the survey forms. Thirty-eight completed survey and consent forms were returned. Eighteen of the thirty-eight received were female, twenty were male. Ages ranged from 11 to 18 with a mean of 14.18.

Instruments

Model of relationships survey. The Model of Relationships Survey (MRS), completed by the adolescents, is modeled after LaGaipa's (1987) friendship behavior scale which presents a behavior and a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always." Teens and preteens were asked to generate five: things parents and children are supposed to do together; things parents are supposed to do for children; things that children are supposed to do for parents; feelings that parents and children are supposed to have for each other; and rules that parents and children should have about the way they act or behave with each other. The scales were designed to cover the behavioral, affective and cognitive components of a relationship. These questions also differentiate between parent as a general societal role and parent as a role in the parent-child relationship. All of the questions asked about behaviors, feelings or rules occurring *between* the parent and the child or on the part of one *towards* the other. Then each participant determined how often each activity (behavior, feeling, rule) should be enacted on a Likert scale.

The Expectation-Experience difference score was obtained by asking the

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participants to report how often each behavior they had previously generated actually occurs in their own parent-child relationship. In this way, the difference between the child's expectations, beliefs etc. in the model and how well those expectations, beliefs are met/enacted in their own parent-child relationship was quantified.

The MRS was used in a previous study with elementary aged children and achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .72, with college students .84. For this sample, the Model of Relationships Survey obtained an alpha of .63 which may indicate that adolescents have more problems defining the parent-child relationship than either elementary or college aged students.

We began the analysis of categorical data by using the coding scheme created for Dixson's previous work with elementary students (1995) and college students (Dixson & Stein, 1998). (See tables of categories in Appendix 1).

Family life survey. Family satisfaction was measured by using an adaptation of a Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991) called the Family Life Survey. This scale asks how adolescents feel their relationship with their families have been over the last two months. It uses seven-point semantic differentials to measure eight specific items: miserable/enjoyable; hopeful/discouraging; empty/full; interesting/boring; rewarding/disappointing; doesn't give me much chance/brings out the best in me; lonely/friendly; worthwhile/useless. It also includes one global satisfaction item of completely satisfied/completely dissatisfied. This scale has been used with marital couples and achieved alphas ranging from .88 to .94 with correlations between the individual item totals and the global rating from .63 to .80 (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). In the previous study with young children the eight items yielded an alpha of .80. with college students a .93. For this sample the eight items yielded an alpha of .80. Correlation between the subscale of eight items and the global item was $r = .80$.

Revised family communication patterns instrument. The adolescents also completed the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (RFCP) (Ritchie

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& Fitzpatrick, 1990) to investigate the degree of conversation orientation they feel exists in their families' communication patterns. The RFCP consists of a set of 26 statements designed to assess the degree of conversation (15 items) and conformity (11 items) orientation of communication in the family. Participants responded by indicating their level of agreement with the statements.

The conformity orientation scale yielded test-retest reliabilities close to 1.0 (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 531) and an alpha of .76. The scale achieved a .70 Cronbach alpha for the previous study with young children and an alpha of .86 with the college sample. For this sample of adolescents an alpha of .74 was found.

Results

H_1: Conformity orientation will be significantly and negatively correlated with adolescent satisfaction.

Results were significant $r = -.38$, $p < .02$ (mean for family life satisfaction was 4.97, sd = 1.17; conformity = 49.98, sd = 10.13)

RQ_1: a: What expectations about behaviors, rules, and or feelings do adolescent's report as not being met?

We defined "unmet" as anything above the mean of expectations-experience score which was 1 or more for each category (means and sd for differences were: MRS = 1 .74; .82; MRS2 = .61; .86; MRS3 = .61; .67; MRS4 = .49, .68; .68; MRS5 = 1, .92.)

MRS 1 asked What parents and children should do together. The unmet expectations reported most often were going places together, eating and talking.

Insert Table 1

about here

MRS 2 asked what parents should do for children. The top three unmet expectations were love them, care for them and buy them things.

Insert Table 2

about here

MRS 3 asked what children should do for parents. For this item, adolescents reported not meeting their own expectations about chores, listening to parents and respecting parents.

Insert Table 3

about here

MRS 4 was concerned with feelings that parents and children should have for each other. Highest scoring unmet expectations included love and respect and negative emotions (anger, sorrow).

Insert Table 4

about here

Finally, MRS 5 asked about rules parents and children should follow. Unmet expectations centered around being nice (no hitting, swearing, fighting), obeying and respect for each other.

Insert Table 5

about here

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b. Are any of these reported significantly more often than others?

None of the five areas had categories reported significantly more often than others. Chi-squares for each area can be found with Tables 1-5.

RQ_2: Are there significant differences between the unmet

expectations reported by satisfied and unsatisfied adolescents.

There were also no significant differences between the unmet expectations reported by satisfied and unsatisfied adolescents. Tables of categories with chi-square results can be seen in Appendix 1

Discussion

The significant, negative correlation between satisfaction and conformity orientation, with higher levels of conformity orientation related to lower levels of satisfaction with family was expected but also surprising. It was expected in that higher levels of conformity orientation assume lower levels of conversation orientation and we have considerable evidence (Dixson, 1995; Fisher & Dixson, 2001) that conversation orientation is positively correlated with family satisfaction. It is surprising because no significant correlation was found with the elementary or college aged students in previous studies. It would appear that communication that is conformity oriented is especially problematic for adolescents who probably struggle most with the individual-family dialectic. Adolescents may be especially sensitive to communication which seems to ignore their growing individuality and autonomy. Conformity orientation may be expected by elementary aged children and simply not much of an issue to college students.

The insignificant findings regarding the kinds of expectations and whether they differ between satisfied and unsatisfied youth indicates that it is not the kind of unmet expectation which matters but the degree to which that expectation is not met. We can account for 23% of the variance in family satisfaction for this age group by knowing their reported level of conversation orientation and their MRS score (to what degree expectations are met) (Fisher & Dixson, 2001). Evidently, it is not a particular expectation not being met, but a pattern of unmet expectations which are related to adolescent's dissatisfaction with family life. Parents can, probably, disappoint them in an area or two without seriously straining the relationship. Parents cannot consistently not meet the expectations of their adolescents without causing some harm to family life and the parent-child relationship. However, conversation

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orientation (and not conformity orientation) within the relationship may allow these expectations to be discussed and modified, if necessary.

Implications

As this was an exploratory study, the implications center around two primary needs. The first is the need to validate the findings with a more sophisticated instrument. At this point, we should be able to revise the MRS form into a likert scale format which will be both easier and quicker for respondents and allow for more sophisticated statistics to be used in analysis. The second need is to systematically compare the results of the kinds of met and unmet expectations of children from elementary through college aged students.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are standard. The sample size is too small. It proved much more difficult than expected to get teens to take time to complete survey forms, even with a cash incentive. Teens are all from the midwest. And, while the coding system seems to have face validity, due to time constraints, reliability was not measured.

Conclusion

This study represents the final study in the first stage exploration of children's expectations of the parent child relationship and how that is affected by communication and affects satisfaction with family life. This study added back a variable, conformity orientation, which had proven irrelevant in the previous studies indicating that while some areas are consistent across the developmental span from elementary to college, others are not. Conversation orientation and the degree to which expectations are met are consistently related to family satisfaction. Degree of expectations being met is also consistently related to conversation orientation. However, only in adolescents was conformity orientation related to satisfaction. This finding gives us some insight into the differences in perspective of adolescents as they struggle for their own individuality and autonomy within the family system. Recognizing this struggle and supporting their efforts to be reasonably independent

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is a difficulty job for parents. Understanding their children's expectations can help make that job easier. Solid, conversation oriented communication skills are the path to that understanding for both parents and adolescents.

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Table 1

MRS1 Unmet Expectations in response to what should parents and children do together.

Category	# of Responses
Go places (vacation, social events)	32
Eat	16
Talk	14
Recreational activities	12
Respect	8
Spend time	6
Help	4
Other	10
Total	102

X^2 (7 df) = 3.29, ns

Table 2

MRS2 Unmet Expectations in response to what should parents do for children.

Category	# of Responses
Care for them	18
Love and respect them	17
Buy them things	16
Give them attention/time	9
Take them places	3
Clean up	2
Prepare food	2
Be nice	1
Other	9
Total	77

X^2 (9 df) = 7.25, ns

Table 3

MRS3 Unmet Expectations in response to what should children do for parents.

Category	# of Responses
Chores	21
Love and respect	13
Listen	12
Help	11
Obey	9
Work hard	4
Be nice	1
Family care	1
Other	12
Total	84

X^2 (8 df) = 3.86, ns

Table 4

MRS4 Unmet Expectations in response to what feelings should parents and children have for each other.

Category	# of Responses
Love and respect	20
Sorrow, anger, negative	8
Truth and trust	6
Happy	6
Understanding	5
Friendship	4
Sharing	1
Other	20
Total	70

^{2} (7 df) = 4.76, ns

Table 5

MRS5 Unmet Expectations in response to what rules should parent and children follow.

Category	# of Responses
Be nice (no hitting, fighting, swearing)	33
Obey rules, do chores	16
Be respectful	14
Talk and listen	13
Be honest	6
Be good	1
Other	29
Total	112

X^2 (6 df) = 3.10, ns

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Appendix 1

Comparison of unmet expectations of
satisfied and unsatisfied (with family life) adolescents*

MRS1 Unmet Expectations in response to what should parents and children do together.

Category	# of Responses not satisfied	satisfied
Go places (vacation, social events)	18	
Eat	6	
Talk	8	
	3	
Recreational activities		
	Respect	
Spend time	2	
Help	2	
Other	6	
Total	48	54

X^2 (7 df) = 2.25, ns

MRS2 Unmet Expectations in response to what should parents do for children.

Category	# of Responses	
Care for them	8	10
Love and respect them	10	7
Buy them things	10	6
Give them attention/time	3	6
Take them places	2	9
Clean up	1	1
Other	4	5
Total	37	37

X^2 (6 df) = .67, ns

MRS3 Unmet Expectations in response to what should children do for parents.

Category	# of Responses	
	not satisfied	satisfied
Chores	8	13
Love and respect	3	10
Listen	5	7
Help	2	9
Obey	5	4
Work hard	1	3
Other	5	4

Total 31 51

X^2 (6 df) = 1.42, ns

MRS4 Unmet Expectations in response to what feelings should parents and children have for each other.

Category	# of Responses not satisfied	satisfied
Love and respect	6	14
Sorrow, anger, negative	6	2
Truth and trust	1	5
Happy	3	3
Understanding	2	3
Friendship	2	2
Other	9	11

Total 29 40

^{2} (6 df) = 1.72, ns

MRS5 Unmet Expectations in response to what rules should parent and children follow.

Category	# of Responses not satisfied	satisfied

Be nice (no hitting, fighting, swearing)	18
	7
Obey rules, do chores	
	Be respectful
Talk and listen	8
Be honest	1
Other	13

Total	53	55

X^2 (5 df) = 1.12, ns

*Deleted categories with only zero in either cell.

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